IronWatch

Issue
11

Staff

Aaron Leahy — "Sardonic Wolf"
Aaron Magno—"sewersaint"
Alex Visentin — "reVenAnt"
Austin Peasley — "darkPrince010"
Bil — "Orcsbain"
Boris Samec — "Thane Bobo"
Chris Cousen—"Mister C"
Chris Livingstone— "stlwarrior"
Chris Schlumpberger— "Darkover"
Claudia Zuminich "Cornonthecob"
Doug Newton-Walters — "Hellebore"
"Dusty"
E. McIlraith — "Crow"
"imm0rtal reaper"
Jack Evans — "ManticfanboyLAD"
Jason Flint—"Weedy Elf"
Joe Ketterer
John Hoyland— "katzbalger"
Jonathan Faulkes
Jonathan Hicks — "jontheman"
Jonathan Peace
Kenny Moncrieff
"left64"
"Maccwar"
Mark Relf
Mark Smith — "scarletsquig"
Matt—"Dustcrusher"
Matt Gilbert — "mattjgilbert"
Matthäus Mieczkowski — "Max Jet"
Matt I. — "JoV"
Maxwell McDougall — "Lord Marcus"
Michael DeFranco — "MDSW"
"Nathan"
Neil Dixon
Nick Williams—"Daedle"
"Osbad"
"Panda"
Pete Kijek — "Pathfinder Pete McF"
"puggimer"
Ryan Shaw — "The Dire Troll"
Sharad Vora
Shane Baker — "Shaneimus"
"Skolo"
"Sneaky Chris"
Stuart Smith — "Merlin"
"Sukura636"
"TSNC"

ABYSSAL TIDINGS

A Message from the Editor

Firstoff, I'd like to apologize for the slight tardiness of this issue: Apparently computer glitches and heat waves are never a good combination for punctuality!

That said, thanks for joining us for another thrilling issue of the IRONWATCH official Mantic fan-produced magazine! Be sure to follow the stunning stories in It's a Job and Breach, and take a look at our brand-new Iron Forge monthly section for some absolutely stunning artwork from an array of very talented painters.

I'd encourage those of you reading that have a wargaming blog to submit content you might have for us to publish! As long as it's related to Mantic, either using their minis, or game systems (Or both!), we'd be happy to include it and help introduce other readers to yet more aspects of this awesome hobby!

As always, thanks for reading, and Welcome to the Watch!

-Austin

Cover art by Boris Samec
Title art by Mark Smith

Please note that, while we here at **Ironwatch** *attempt to deliver you the best products and ideas we can, we cannot guarantee the balance of any scenarios or special rules presented herein. If you find any errors, grammar mistakes, or rule imbalances, please contact us on the Mantic Forums (Look for the discussion labeled "Ironwatch Issue X Feedback") and let us know what we could do to improve your fan-produced magazine. If you are interested in writing, illustrating, or editing for our magazine, please let us know on the feedback discussion as well so you can get in on the action!*

All models used in this publication are from the respective author's own personal collections, and any models displayed herein are not intended to challenge the status of the copyrights of their respective owners. All rights are reserved to their respective owners.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

IRONWATCH

The Kings of War Virtual Gaming Club 4

Operation Intimacy 6

The Iron Forge 8

KINGS OF WAR

More Journeys of the Weedy Elves, by Weedyelf 17

The Haunting Promise, by Kenny Moncrieff 24

WARPATH

It's a Job, Part 4, By Aaron Magno 31

Deadzone, by Kenny Moncrieff 38

Breach, Part II, by Michael Grey 41

UPCOMING NEWS FROM THE IRONWATCH!

THE KOW VIRTUAL GAMING CLUB

KoW is a social game. Building and painting models can often be a solo activity, but playing the game usually requires a fellow enthusiast; someone to share a laugh with, share tactics with.. all whilst trying to slaughter their models before your own get trashed.

A number of us would have started our gaming lives in friendly local gaming stores (FLGS) or perhaps in Games Workshop's high street offering. As we got to know more and more people we'd perhaps think about starting a regular club – where we could play games that weren't supported by the FLGS; or use models that were non-GW.

But what happens if you want to play a new game that doesn't have a huge player base? Or you live far from other gamers? Or you're fed up of playing the same 3 people every week?

Solving these issues was the thought behind the KoW virtual gaming club. Using the power of Universal Battle (www.universalbattle.com) and Skype, players from around the world can meet up, virtually, and play KoW.

UPCOMING NEWS FROM THE IRONWATCH!

It has to be said that the games are not as good as playing face to face; as online poker is not the same as having the boys around for a few hands, but it does allow for people to get their fix.

The real benefit comes from the on-demand nature of the games. There are not set days, no set times. Just go to our Mantic Forum thread (http://forum.manticblog.com/showthread.php?3851-KoW-virtual-gaming-club) and ask if anyone fancies a game.

The Universal Battle software is fairly easy to learn, although I would recommend getting the "pro" version for $5 / 3 months access. This allows you to access the KoW specific armies created by KingOfSmurfs.

How successful is this format? Well, Darklord (Dan) and KingOfSmurfs (Chris) have been using it regularly to try out their armies for the Pathfinder events; 1st and 2nd at the Cardiff event was the eventual outcome. The US CoK champion has also played a game on the software against Dan – something that really couldn't have been done in real life.

As someone once said, "the more I practice the luckier I get". If you want to learn more about the virtual gaming club or universal battle, post on the thread and I'm sure someone will be able to help out.▪

Operation Intimacy

Leaked by Agent Hellebore

Ashen rain trickled down heavy girders as S-52 discretely tailed subject alpha from on high. It had taken months of subtle inquiries and not inconsiderate bribes to bring him here, to this Forgefather border planet. Research had determined that Forgefather interests here were more than they seemed and S-52 now believed some special project was being undertaken.

The Forgefathers were a highly advanced and secretive species, almost paranoid and yet they eagerly sold their technology to the highest bidder. This dichotomy was less outrageous than it first appeared as they placed failsafe devices in all their products to prevent tampering or reverse engineering. As most Corp Central ultratech was derived from them, Control had been forced to drain their petty cash to develop the equipment S-52 was using during this operation, to avoid those same Forgefather safeguards.

S-52's crypsis field shimmered and sparked as the rain suddenly increased as lightning raced across the sky. Apparently they didn't count on stormy weather he thought sourly. The heavy set Forgefather at the end of the road stopped and turned to peer down the path. S-52's cyberhanced body reacted in the blink of an eye, locking his musculature and stopping his circulatory system, keeping him perfectly still, clinging to a megagirder five metres up. Oxyplants kicked in to continue cellular respiration until the subject turned and continued down the dark corridor of steel. Icons blinked off on his occ-HUD as his parallel cyber system removed the locks on his musculature and S-52 continued his vertiginous pursuit.

The subject had appeared on S-52's radar as a low level brokkr merchant and he'd almost dismissed him outright had it not been for the statistically significant increase in his consumption of Syphr cuisine. Patient surveillance had revealed an extremely subtle clandestine meeting structure that involved the trading of meal orders between subject alpha and another, beta, sitting at a separate table. It had taken S-52 a week to realise it was the size, type and year of beverage the Forgefathers ordered that were the most important aspects of the code.

All that had led him here, trailing alpha through a construction district. The densely packed gantries, cranes and construction materials had given S-52 excellent points of entry and cover and his sub dermal implants allowed him to climb virtually any surface. However the density and variety of the metals and alloys used by the Forgefathers was playing merry havoc with his comms and

tracking, forcing him to stick extremely close to alpha in order not to lose him.

Alpha made a final turn and disappeared from view. Overriding his oxyplants S-52 hyper-oxygenated his system and boosted his speed. Jumping from girder to girder he sailed over a gap between two mega-crane cabs and his occ-HUD suddenly registered alpha's marker below. Reversing his direction with a quick twist and push, S-52 climbed down the second cab to regain his subject. He spied him under the arch of the mega-crane tracks next to another Forgefather. As they conversed in their own language, S-52's amplifiers recorded and translated it for him through the occ-HUD.

'Heat is done. Power restored.'

'Blade agreed?'

'Within structure.'

Alpha handed designate gamma a tiny pad of paper before ducking out from the tracks and heading back in the direction he had come. Paper? The Forgefathers wouldn't normally use something so primitive or difficult to hide. Do they suspect surveillance? It would explain why S-52 was unable to find any information on any of the devices carried by alpha or kept at his residence. The unusual methods and behaviour of the Forgefathers involved in this special project were beginning to paint a picture of something of great importance.

His occ-HUD suddenly pinged, indicating an image it caught had been interpolated. The point count was too low for a high level analysis, but initial regression suggested a military application.

S-52 shifted his primary target to gamma and followed him out of the district. With comms back online he submitted his report to Control. After the requisite time a single response was received:

'Continue.'

The Iron Forge

Welcome to the Iron Forge. This is the first in what we hope will become a regular and popular feature for the Ironwatch magazine. Ironwatch has lacked a recurring feature specifically showcasing painted Mantic models and so I proposed the idea of putting a team together to Austin (Ironwatch's editor). I then approached a number of well-known faces in the Mantic community who have all demonstrated their painting skills and luckily none of them turned me down!

The team's initial goal is to produce one newly painted Mantic model each for every issue of the magazine. While real life might mean not everyone can make it every month, I'm hoping we gain enough momentum to make this a real success and can also start to call on guest painters for some issues too. We'll also be happy to feature dioramas, full units, teams or whole armies – anything that provides inspiration and creativity to really show off Mantic's great range of models.

If the community like the new feature we

By Nick Williams

can get more creative, with tutorials, tip and tricks, themed issues and the like. Your feedback and ideas are most welcome to help us gauge the reaction to this new venture and what you would like to see.

The Iron Forge Painting Team are:
Matt Gilbert, Nick Williams, Christian Schlumpberger, Claudia Zuminich, Paul Scott and Darren Lysenko. Of course, Austin has said he might chip in too :)

Please use the Ironwatch feedback threads on the Mantic forums to let us know what you think. I hope you enjoy this month's inaugural set of pictures.

-Matt▪

By Darren Lysenko

By Chris Schlumpberger

CHRIS SCHLUMPBERGER

The Veer-myn Night Lord has always been one of my favorite Warpath models. The gruesome drill, the vicious chem weapon, the whole beast is simply powerful and nasty as hell. Unfortunately the painting process for the Night Lord was not as funny as I had hoped. I had to redo some sections over and over again until I was finally satisfied and even then I applied weathering, dust and blood splatter to cover some mistakes (you have to use some dirty tricks if necessary :)). The main paintjob was done with red primer, base colors and army painter shade, followed by lots of detail

CHRIS SCHLUMPBERGER

work and a little OSL with my airbrush. Even though this is probably not my best model and way below the level of my fellow painters of the Iron Forge, I'm pretty happy with the result and already looking forward to next month.

CŁAUDIA ZUMINICH

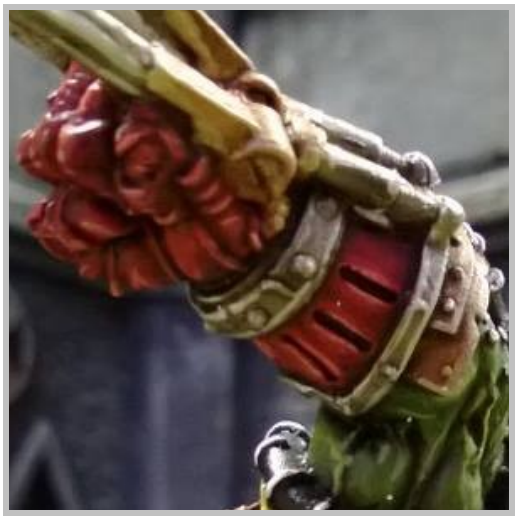
The Goblin War Trombone is a very detailed model, casting in metal. Both, the war machine and the crew have an steampunk style, ideal for painting metals and Leathers. For Trombone base body, I used metallic paints that can be polished, which gives a realistic texture and appearance to the forged iron canyon. Finally the weathering gives an sloppy Goblin appearance.

DARREN LYSENKO

When I was looking for a Giant for my Kings of War Orc army, I think I took it all a bit too literally because "Blind Mungo", as I lovingly call him, actually *is* a giant orc - a 3-up resin cast of an Orc Ax from Mantic's 'Collector's Range', to be exact.

The reason Mungo is in fact 'blind' is completely down to indecision on my part. I really wanted to give him one solid brass prosthetic eye. I was also desperate to give him a really pale and milky, sightless eye. In the end, I decided to do both, meaning that my Krudger can now only point this flailing behemoth in the right direction at the start of the battle and hope for the best...

Matt Gilbert



I assembled this model months ago and it's been sitting on the shelf since then while I painted KoW and DB models. Our new painting feature was the perfect excuse to finally paint it.

I started with a white undercoat rather than black as favored by a lot of people at the moment. I had also decided that the skin would be traditional green and that I wanted yellow in there somewhere to as a dominant color. Beyond that, the model almost painted itself as I went along. Painting the fist red unbalanced the model so making the opposing shoulder the same color helped redress that and then the red tongue finished it off, creating a

Matt Gilbert

triple-point of spot color.

I know a lot of people paint whole discreet areas in one go before moving to the next but I'm more traditional and tend to paint a whole model at once.

Whether this color scheme is reflected in the rest of my Marauder army when I get round to it, I'll let the brushes decide.

Nick Williams

MORE JOURNEYS BY THE WEEDY ELVES

By Weedyelf

"So when is the next one?"

The question I got bombarded with the day after our first tournament. It was a huge success, with 8 players turning up with a variety of armies. Dice were cast, there were cheers and groans as players tried to out smart each other, and lady luck helped or hindered!

So another was definitely needed. So with a bit of pre planning another was penciled in, hosted at the same venue, Total Wargamer. With about 2 months notice, everyone had plenty of time to sign up, paint and play test! This time it was 1600 points, and no unique characters or allies. But otherwise things remained the same, with the simple objective or destroy your opponent and score as much tournament points and attrition points as you could!

The run up to the tournament saw an opportunity to try out some changes to the list I had used at the first tourney. The Cardiff Regional was a few weeks before hand and rules set was almost identical to our own. So along with Pathfinder Chris and a motley bunch of mad wargamers, we made the journey to FireStorm games.

For this tourney, I dropped the horde of bowmen with the jar of four winds. While it was very handy unleashing 20 attacks at long range, it was a huge points sink (335!) so I

split it up into 2 bowmen regiments, and also split the palace guard into 2 half-regiments with musicians. With this new set up I had more units to play with, but a little less durable combat troops and shortened my overall range with missile attacks. But I reasoned the extra units and ability to deliver crushing strength in 2 places I reasoned would be handy. I wasn't quite happy with the list however, I would've preferred to take scout regiments to save some points.

Cardiff Regional proved a tougher test, I found myself once again up against a regular opponent as my first game (as it had been in the TWG tourney before!) and to our shock and horror not only did we, for the first time ever, manage a result other than a draw, but it was a crushing defeat for my opponent who had a single hero left at the end. However such victories were short lived, as "Darklord" and "LordofSmurfs" were my next opponents, both excellent players who managed to table me in both games and they went on to claim 1st and 2nd. Bad luck being drawn against the top 2 players maybe but it was a vital learning curve. I left Firestorm a wiser man, with new gaming buddies and a few boxes of Elven scouts. And a plan.

So arrived the tournament me and Pathfinder Chris had put together. Things had changed a bit more. The horde was still gone, but so were the archers. The palace guard had reformed back into a regiment, the archer regiment had become a scout regiment, and an additional 2 scouts troops were added to the army, giving me 6 scout troops. I also managed to squeeze a mage on horse in there too. 70 ranged attacks plus 4 bolt throwers and zap should, in theory, give me a powerful first couple of turns that should

By "Panda"

break units before they even clash with my spears and greatswords.

12 players turned out this time, a large increase on the last tournament! However the variety of armies seemed less, a lot of undead and Dwarf armies made a show. Players from the Cardiff regional also made a show, our tournaments had gained some renown already it seemed! My first game was drawn and I was against a fellow Elf player!

He was still fairly new to KoW but like most who take it up, he had learned the game quickly and was instead learning how to play effectively. He brought to the table a fierce looking army, 5 bolt throwers out numbered my 4, and 3 troops of Drakons backed up by spearmen and worst of all, a Dragon. With The Fog. I set my bolt throwers up on the hill to my left, put my 4 regiments in front across the hill and towards the ruined building, and scouts in front of them. I also put 2 troops of scouts in the wood on my right. He set up his drakons opposite my bolt throwers, spears in the middle, and that annoying Dragon on his left.

I fired with everything I had, causing some damage on his bolt throwers and wavering a troop of drakons. However he hit my scouts

in the forest with his dragon, who toasted them up before wiping them out in combat the following turn. His other drakons crashed into the palace guard who just held their ground. The other troop of drakons fled from some more bow-fire and the other drakons fled from a devastating flank charge. The Dragon, having only taken minimal damage continued munching on my scouts, leaving my right flank empty. With his Drakons destroyed, his Spears arrived and clashed with my own. The stalemate was only broken by a flank charge by a scout regiment. His bolt throwers continued to pound my regiments which had become dangerously close, while my own war-machines concentrated on trying to destroy his. The Dragon, hiding in the woods, was pounded by zap again and again, the fog and trees offering no protection to magic. Turn after turn it wavered, its inspiring preventing it breaking. The game ended with the Dragon, bleeding but still alive. Its huge points value meant I had won, but not by as much points as it seemed.

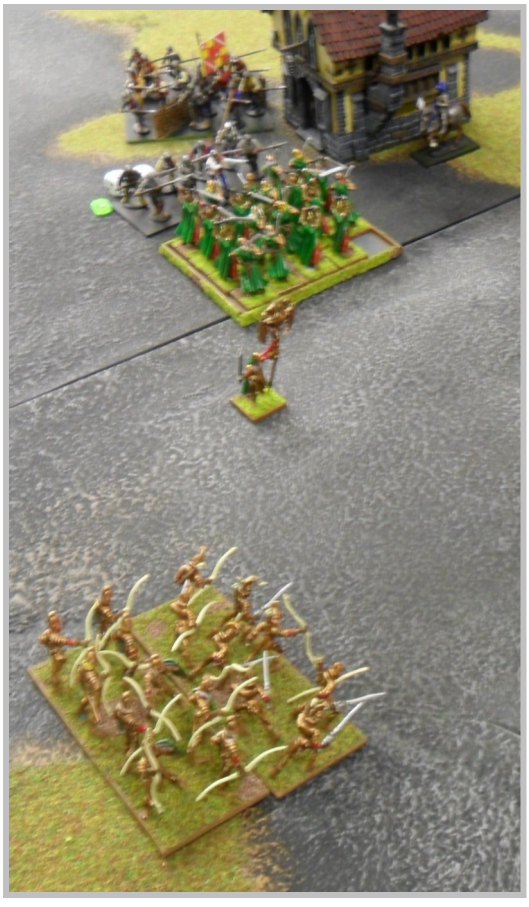
Game 2 I was drawn against Dwarves. Who brought a horde of Ironclad, 2 shield breakers, IronGuard and 5 cannons with a warsmith. This game was a blood bath. We both saw the Orc huts in the centre, and knowing that despite the smell, they offered great protection to ours units flanks. Our centers clashed, his IronGuard collapsed under the volume of attacks but his horde quickly moved in to prevent my units moving through. Scout troops on the left managed to overwhelm shield breakers by surrounding them and tried to move around the back of the horde, but Dwarf cannons put a stop to that. My war-machines attacked his cannons in turn, but a Berserker Lord with the Fly ability managed to cut his way through a scout troop, a scout regiment, and then he pulled apart 2 bolt throwers in a vulgar display of contempt for Elvish technology. My Spears finally broke under the pressure of the IronClads and the Dwarves seized the middle. However with so little left on each side it was a draw with no clear winner.

Game 3 saw me once again, playing my regular opponent and his Pike heavy Kingdom of Men army. That meant that in every tournament we had played against each other. Would it be another predictable draw, or could I pull off another slaughter? Or did fate dictate that it was his turn to win? I put my regiments in the middle, with bolt throwers on my right. Scouts all spread

out ahead of the army with the intention of using the buildings to prevent his numerous Bill troops out moving me. He spread out across his deployment zone, Bill troops in front with pike hordes following closely. His 5 war-machines on the hills behind. I quickly dispatched of one of his mortars and wavered some Bill, but otherwise a disappointing first strike. He surged forward undeterred, forming a line in the middle of the buildings. A Hero with the Wings (again, less scary than a Berserker though) charged my scouts who held, and stabbed back but failed to kill him. He spied my war-machines and flew over my scouts, and started picking apart my bolt throwers until a well placed zap spell put a stop to that.

His Knight troop moved forward too quick, meaning a flank charge by my scouts was able to drag them from their mounts. Our 2 lines clashed and anything smaller than a regiment perished in a single turn. His Pike hordes then connected and my Elves fled before their fierce attacks. Things started to look bleak, but with damage mounting on his hordes I knew it could change quickly. With his 2 pike hordes now at close range, I charged my palace guard into the one with the Fog, hoping the charge would break them or my last combat regiment would be doomed, and fired everything on his other approaching from the right. It fell apart from the barrage of arrows, bolts and zap. The Billmen Regiment fled from a volley from the Scout regiment, and a scout troop saw off his Bill Troop. It was now up to the Palace Guard to break his horde, which they managed. His centre and left was broken, with only combat troops on his right to commit. A brief exchange saw neither achieve anything, and the game ended..... a draw. Back to tradition.

So with 1 win, and 2 draws but a large attrition score to back it up from the Dwarf and Men game, we gathered to listen to the scores. Pathfinder Chris had been on a rampage and scored first place. Dwarf player



Jack Evans collected 2nd place and I had placed.... 3rd! Not as good as first from the previous tourney but still a top 3 place which I was more than happy with the lack of wins. Quite a few people had finished on 5 tournament points but a good attrition score meant I was just ahead.

So after all of that, I got back and logged on to my computer what was the message greeting me?

"So when is the next one?"▪

The Haunting Promise

By Kenny Moncrieff

By Stuart Smith

Her reflection in the wine made Velna realise just how she had become. Her long dark hair was loose, her face was grim as a dwarf and her eyes were like that of a daemon.

"So what is the reason you summoned me?"

Velna patiently lifted her head up to the other Twilight kin opposite to her of the dining table. He was bigger than their kind in more than one way, especially with his overbearing armour.

"Yes. I wanted to inform you lord Helm that I'll be seizing control of your forces."

"My forces? You mean my entire army?" chuckled Helm. "And what makes you think I'm handing it over?"

"Because I'll be inheriting it."

The elf's eyes squinted. "I had no idea you were into jokes Velna. I always understood you were as dull as the breeze and yet just as refreshing." Helm cocked his head. "How about you become one of my wives then we can talk about inheritance."

"No need."

"Hmp. Okay then, how about explaining to me how is it that you'll be inheriting my army? I have five children, two wives and over a dozen cousins?"

Velna rested her chin on her wrists. "I'll inherit your army, because once your dead, the general is the older brother of mine. So he'll merge with my army in hopes of seizing command. Many in your soldiers won't oppose this unless they want to be passed onto another member of your family. However the problem is that you were the only one competent in your family. Nearly everyone, including your wives have been

nothing but ingrate sloths or have the brains of trolls that without you, many of them would be dead or on the streets. Your cousins and sons could merge their armies of course to make yours assimilate by force, but three of your cousins are at bitter war with each other, one your sons is far too lazy and the rest will be too afraid. Therefore there is no obstacle to stop me from taking what was once yours."

The lord looked a lot smaller with that dumb look on his face. "Th-that's of course if I'm dead."

"But you are dead. You drank the 'moments of undeath' poison. Your entire body is numb which is why your brains failing to register that no blood is being pumped..."

Helm dropped his cup and seemed to have spotted the black splodges in the wine. "B-but your family has always had a tradition of never harming their guests."

"You actually believe that. My family has always been deceitful scum that has never cared what others think of them, so long as we have power."

"B-but-."

It's strange however that the once great Lord Helm was brought down by trusting another Twilight kin

"I really did think you'd be more challenge Helm. In fact I was concerned that there'd be war and I'd be crushed. Risky I know, but I really do need your army. It's strange however that the once great Lord Helm was brought down by trusting another Twilight kin. Probably-." Helm banged against the table. "How rude. He died before I could finish."

"Maybe couldn't take any more of your blathering," snickered Maegar Gilfer. "Probably what really killed him."

"Then why are you still alive?"

"Does it matter?" asked Isen Starslayer. The brooding Twilight leaned over the

By Darren Lysenko

By Grant Mahoney

table. “I think everyone will know your family’s so-called tradition is now nothing but a tale.”

“If we weren’t so good at covering up Isen, we wouldn’t have a so-called family tradition.”

Maegar use to be the heir of a powerful lord, but a nasty accident with some apparent soup melted half his face off

“Hmp, the fact that your family is steeped in lies and deceit wonders how I can trust you.”

Velna snatched Isen off his feet, onto her laps and pressed her lips against him. When she was finished, she gazed at his stunned face. “That is why.” Isen was a greedy slime that took what was being dangled over him. The idea he had a chance of marrying her, gave him dreams of sharing her vast power.

Maegar snickered.

“Wh-what are you laughing at!” shouted Isen.

“Your face!”

Velna threw Isen off him and he crashed into the plates making Maegar laugh louder. The kin was unpredictable and irritating, but his lack of ambition and relying on others was what made Velna able to trust him.

Isen thumped against the table frustrated. “At least I have more than half a face you scum!” Maegar kept laughing.

Maegar use to be the heir of a powerful lord, but a nasty accident with some apparent soup, melted half his face off. A slave in the knowledge of healing saved him in hopes of a reward. But the first thing Maegar did once he found his life was ruined was maul the healer. He was soon exiled by his family for a

By "Dusty"

very suspicious reason.

These two were the closes trustful retinue she could find, at the moment.

"Lady Velna," said a messenger. He glanced at the body.

"Speak."

"The admiral has regrettably withdrawn from the expedition."

Velna leered. "Why?"

"He would not explain."

"Quite a dilemma," said Isen. "We'll look weak if admiral Ritrek leaves our forces."

And no one made Velna look weak. She got up. "Where is admiral Ritrek."

"At the Heartgutted Inn my lady."

"Thank you."

The messenger immediately left.

"Maegar, I want that messenger killed if you will."

"As you command my lady."

"Isen, stay here and clean up, I'll deal with admiral Ritrek on my own."

"Why did you want someone like that as the head of our fleet? He is an oaf of a Twilight kin that made the rank of admiral by luck."

"Maegar, I want that messenger killed if you will."

"Because admirals ask questions before they are willing sail a ship. Ritrek is too desperate to be asking questions and I'll remind him of that."

*

Velna entered the dank inn of Heartgutted. There were kin slumped over tables and floors, perhaps dead. Others were having slurred conversations. Some also eyed her. Velna just walked pass them. She was in her family armour; a lowborn kin had some wits not to touch her, no matter how drunk.

"Hey, if it isn't Lady Velna!" yelled someone. At a table sat a kin more dwarf than a proper elf. He had a long musty beard, stout body and hardened flesh. Only thing that drove him apart from a dwarf was his height, pointy ears and spiteful jealous eyes. "Here for me are you! Come have a seat!" He then bolstered. "Let's talk about how I'm stepping off this voyage!"

Shouldn't be surprised. This army, this really huge army, the fleet and yet you couldn't get a captain better than me

Velna slid beside him and gazed. The kin stuck out his chest and raised his chin. He then puffed out laughter.

"Sorry, I find it amusing you actually came to this place. A lord or lady wouldn't be caught half dead coming here. They'd normally sick their dogs to get what they wanted. Especially the inn's beer, it's pretty good, want some?" He held his tankard out to her. "Oh? Are you upset that Admiral Ritrek's left your crew? Shouldn't be surprised. This army, this really huge army, the fleet and yet you couldn't get a captain better than me. There's a whole lot of fancy admirals you could've gotten, yet you got me to be the head of your fleet. Well that could only mean you couldn't get any other admiral and you know what that tells me. You're not getting me either. Got anything to say? Well? Say something?"

Words would only have caused more problems. Velna slugged Ritrek and he hit the floor. She stamped on him and strung his head up by the hair.

By Nick Williams

By "ManticFanBoyLAD"

"I don't have time for you to be fooling around Ritrek. I have expedition almost ready and I don't want you to interfere any more than you already are." She touched his face. "And to remind you that I don't allow games." She slashed him.

Velna then left. She drifted back into the streets and walked amongst its slums. Not much could be said for the lowborn kin home. It had more light than anywhere else, but that was a bad thing. The Twilight kin had become more accustomed to the dark and the abyssal gods favoured the dark, so darkness was treated as a commodity. Velna already felt discomforted by the tinge of light.

"Good evening Lady Velna Bloodrain."

Sauntering out from the shadows was a scantly robed woman with jewellery and wielding a nightmarish staff.

"High Priestess Loverit Deathmaker."

The priestess smiled as innocent as a feline. "Taking a stroll through the dark streets? Highborn don't last long here."

"I wasn't planning on staying long. Now what do I owe the pleasures?"

"Oh, so demanding as ever Lady Velna. Could I just call you Velna? You've never been much of a lady."

"You'd watch your tongue, Loverit."

The priestess cocked her head. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to sound mean. How about I just get back to your question? I want to ask if I can join your expedition."

"Taking a stroll through the dark streets? Highborn don't last long here."

"No."

"Oh don't say that. You'll make me upset."

By Jonathan Faulkes

"But your answer isn't what I wanted it to be."

The Lady glared.

"Don't give me that look. It's rude."

"Then get your pet out of my way before I step on it."

"Sigh, there's just no helping you Velna."

"Why do you want to come on my expedition?"

"Becomes I'm interested. Most the high priestess are. But I'm the only one willing to jump in on this voyage and find out just what is your purpose. So deny me, the other high priestess will want to come aboard as well."

"You heard my answer now be gone."

I'm interested. Most the high priestess are. But I'm the only one willing to jump in on this voyage and find out just what is your purpose

Velna moved away, but an imp creature jumped in her way grinning joyfully.

Loverit was right. There was not much Velna could do if she turned away one of their own kind. It would only starve the cult's curiosity. "Fine." Velna stormed off.

"Okay, see you on the voyage!" shouted Loverit waving.▪

By Chris Schlumpberger

it's a job

part 4

By Aaron Magno

The Anvor System was "discovered" by the Corporation several generations ago and has been a profitable part of the galaxy with mining operations throughout the system. Anvor-5 was especially profitable as it was habitable planet for humans and provided large areas for agriculture. Now, however, there was a problem…

The noise levels in the Unity's Hangar Bay Seven was so great that everybody working there was forced to shout, which only added to the cacophony within.

"Okay, Okay, power it down. That's not working," shouted Weetaub at his subordinate, Lito, who found himself in the unfamiliar position of sitting in the first seat of an APC-13 Warrior.

"Don't know what to say Weets, diagnostics is giving me nothing. It says everything is green," Lito yelled in reply.

Standing outside the Warrior Weetaub stared at the flat digital energy panel being projected from the electronic device strapped around his left wrist. From the readings on the display he could clearly see that everything was not "green" but without the diagnostic information from the Warrior itself he had no idea what was wrong. So he did what he always did in this type of situation that had unfortunately become a much more frequent occurrence, he relied on the wisdom of a much older man.

"Ruhk! Ruhk, did you hear that? We have no idea why the phase contran's output is so low. Can you do something about that?" shouted in the direction of the roof of the Warrior.

A moment later Ruhk stuck his head out over the edge of the Warrior. There were several patches of grease on his head, including a

few in his hair that served to darken his greying hair. Looking down at Weetaub he responded, "Well, I could always replace it."

"If we had a spare unit that's what we'd do. It's on order," said Weetaub.

"It's been on order for a while now," countered Ruhk.

Ealux, with a heavy laser rifle resting on each shoulder, was leading a procession of marines.

"Well, I guess we're just not that high on the priority list," answered Weetaub, "now, can you work your magic and do something about increasing the output?"

Ruhk did not reply, he simply repositioned the goggles he wore from his forehead to cover his eyes and returned to the open access panel on the Warrior's roof. Weetaub shutdown his wrist device's display and turned away from his APC-13 to look at the other two on this side of the hangar. On the other side of the hanger were three more APC-13s being loaded and readied for transport aboard the Ellison-class landing vessel that was in the middle of the hangar separating the two sets of personnel carriers. As Weetaub surveyed the room he was approached by one of the marines who would be riding in his Warrior.

"You missing a part Weets? I'm sure if you let us know what you're looking for we could scrounge one up," offered Ealux.

Ealux, with a heavy laser rifle resting on each

By "Sneaky Chris"

shoulder, was leading a procession of marines. Behind him was Haltrough pushing an anti-gravity sled that carried a couple of crates of ammunition. Haltrough was the shortest member of this section of rat catchers but he seemed even more diminutive as he was walking in front of the section's largest member, Tarvin. The giant of a man had occasionally been described as big as an Orx, which was technically true. In one hand Tarvin was carrying an extra cylinder for his tactical flame unit, while he had another atop his opposite shoulder. Bringing up the rear of this line of rat catchers were Plajon and Kosheer who were carrying a crate of laser rifles between them.

The giant of a man had occasionally been described as big as an Orx, which was technically true

By Paul Scott

It was unsurprising that the two were sharing a task as they had become very close friends during their time in basic training. They were an unusual pairing, partly because of their contrasting skin tones but also because of the two very different homeworlds they came from. Kosheer had pale white skin that matched the snow of the icy planetoid where he was raised but only made his red hair seem more vibrant. Conversely, Plajon's ebony skin matched the darkened visage of his highly volcanic home planet with it's ash filled skies. What the two shared in common was that they both came from families with a long history in mining and neither wanted to go back to that way of life. While watching the group of marines carrying equipment towards his APC-13 Weetaub briefly considered Ealux's offer before dismissing it.

"No, that's all right, it'll work, Ruhk's just got to make a few adjustments but thanks anyway," said Weetaub before turning back to the Warrior, "Hey, Lito, get out here, we got to check the undercarriage on this thing." Weetaub had no doubt that Ealux or someone from his group could acquire a replacement phase contran from somewhere aboard a Corporation battle cruiser but he also had no doubt that if found out he would be joining these rat catchers in a cell, something he had no intention of doing.

By "Hellebore"

*****

Inside the Warrior Lozan and Abist and were dealing with another problem.

"No, we just put it here like this and it'll be ok," said Abist as he moved a small crate against the wall of the personnel carrier.

"Well, it's not really supposed to go there. In fact, I don't know why we need all this extra food. I mean, we're going to be on a planet with plenty of food, what do we need this for?" questioned Lozan.

"I'm not eating that rubbish, who knows what they eat down there," answered Abist.

"Ignoring the fact that as a Corporation world they'll have plenty of the things you'll eat I'm sure that we've already got enough food in our standard rations that we've already loaded," countered Lozan, "besides we'll have this battle cruiser above us to resupply us if need be."

"I don't think the Corporation is going to be transporting anything to us that isn't some kind of weapon," responded Abist, "now just hand me that cable so I can strap this thing in."

As Abist fastened the crate to the side of the APC-13 Ealux entered.

"Space boy here doesn't want to eat the local cuisine so he's packing his own,"

"What are you ladges doing?" asked Ealux.

"Space boy here doesn't want to eat the local cuisine so he's packing his own," explained Lozan.

"First off, that's stupid and secondly, just make sure it's secure, I don't want to be hit in the head with that thing in transit," said Ealux, "Anyway, here's your blaster, Loz."

Lozan took one of the heavy laser rifles off of Ealux's shoulders and went over to his seat in the personnel carrier where he began to lock it into place. Tarvin had also entered the Warrior and headed towards the part of the storage which already contained his tactical flame unit that he had stored prior. He only gave Abist a cursory glance as he past. Plajon and Kosheer followed Tarvin aboard with their crate.

People paused to witness the newest members of the Corporation Marine Corps

"What are you…," Plajon began to ask before being cut off by Abist.

"Look, I'm just bringing a little extra rations. There's plenty of room, it's secure, it'll be fine," said Abist trying not to show his irritation.

"Extra food?" queried Plajon skeptically.

"Yes," responded Abist bluntly.

"How long are you planning on staying down there?" was Plajon's next question but he did not wait for a response, "Just make sure it's empty before we get back. We might not need the extra food but it might come in handy if we need to transport anything back."

Outside the vehicle the sounds of activity had decreased greatly as people paused to witness the newest members of the Corporation Marine Corps be lead into the hangar. All eight of them were dressed head to toe in their brand new combat gear, which included their helmets with the visor down. Having stowed the crates of ammunition aboard the Warrior Haltrough yelled at his squad members inside, "Hey, guys, get out here, they just brought in some replacements"

As the rat catchers exited the personnel carrier it was Ealux as always who was the first to comment, "They look pretty shiny."

By Mark Relf

"You guys think we'll get one?" asked Kosheer.

"I don't know, I think Geerik's squad is down a couple of guys now. Cansell's been short for awhile now," responded Plajon, "There might not be enough of them to restock all the teams."

When you're with fellow marines in general, take the helmet off

"I hope we don't get one of these new grads. I was hoping we'd get somebody with a little experience," said Abist.

By Paul Scott

"You mean like you had experience?" queried Ealux mockingly, "I don't think we need that kind of experience."

"Hey, at least I had fired a weapon in combat," replied Abist.

The marines around him laughed as they knew the story behind Abist's experience with weapons prior to joining the rat catchers.

*****

Grimmon entered the hangar with Kreesa by his side. He saw his men laughing over by their Warrior. Instead of heading directly towards them he went past the group of new recruits.

"Rothis, with me," was all he said when he was within earshot of the recruits but it had the desired effect with one of their number breaking from the group and following him, "And take that damn helmet off. When you're with your team, hell, just when you're with fellow marines in general, take the helmet off because you're going to want to see the eyes of every man who you might end up in combat with. If you can't see their eyes, you don't know if you can trust them."

Rothis hastily slid up his visor and removed his helmet to reveal his very shortly cut blonde hair. Neither Grimmon or Kreesa turned to look into his blue eyes as they neared the rest of their team. His men didn't come to attention when he approached his squad but Grimmon knew he had their complete attention.

"OK men, there's really not much to tell, they got some rats on the surface and we got to go in and clean the place up. This here's Rothis and he's one of us now, make him feel welcomed as the newest Grim Reaper. Haltrough, he's your buddy, so take him and go find a rifle for him. The rest of you, do what you have to do to be comfortable on the ride down because they want us out of here in," Grimmon paused as he looked at his wrist display, "Twenty."

With that the men dispersed in a flurry of activity with Grimmon and Kreesa boarding the Warrior to inspect it.

Haltrough struck up a conversation with his new teammate as they headed away from the APC-13.

"Well, welcome to the Grim Reapers," said Haltrough cordially, "You're straight out of the Academy, aren't you?"

"Thank you, sir," responded Rothis, "Yes, sir."
"Nah, you only have to call the Sarge that. The rest of us are all kind of equal," clarified Haltrough, "Figured with this many recruits at once you'd all be from the Academy. Well as this is your first assignment, you've probably got a lot of questions."

"Well, I guess the first thing is why do you call yourselves the Grim Reapers?" asked Rothis hesitantly.

"That's because of Sarge. Sergeant Grimmon. Grim. Grim Reaper. On some worlds the Grim Reaper is some kind of representation of death, which sounds pretty cool when you're a marine. I'm not real sure what a reaper is but Ealux assures me it's some kind of farming thing," explained Haltrough.

By Chris Schlumpberger

He's your buddy, so take him and go find a rifle for him.

"OK, so that explains that but why are we getting me a new rifle? Surely you have enough weapons for a full section," wondered Rothis.

"Well, here's your first lesson, you can never have enough guns. Or ammunition. Or anything really. So when we see the clerk we explain you're new and we're short some gear. Actually, I'll explain, you just be quiet," said Haltrough, "In fact put your helmet back on. That'll play well."

As Rothis obeyed the instructions he realised he was going to be learning a lot of new rules.▪

DEADZONE

By Kenny Moncrieff

The ragtag group waded through the dense jungles.

“I think we needed a better reason for coming here,” said a scrawny man with scruffy red beard.

“So, apprehending a captain of the enforcers, so we can exchange him for a hefty ransom to fund our cause just isn’t good enough for you, Crimson wolf?” asked a tall man with a helmet and one working visor.

“The cooperation probably won’t do it, Wally. In fact they may just trick us and butcher us all.”

“That’s why we’re going to trick them... first of course,” replied a stout person hefting a burst cannon.

“I don’t know, Riser. I just got a bad feeling. Banzai maybe holding off the cooperation’s own retrieval team, but the cooperation isn’t our only threat.”

A rebel moved beside him. “You’ll feel better if you just stop thinking about the dangers and start thinking about the ca-.”

Bullets hammered into the rebel, the rest scattered. Another rebel was shot down.

By Paul Scott

“Feck. We’ve lost Tamien and Mark!” yelled Crimson wolf. “What’s happening?”

“Ambush I suppose!” replied Riser. “But they’ve only attacked us with one man. Either the cooperation is that cocky or this here’s a diversion. Crimson, snipe the git! Everyone else stay alert!”

Crimson wolf peered through his sniper scope. “Um, I think I see the gunner. But he doesn’t look too well.”

“Oh are you worried a

there's a cold going around?" asked Wally.

"No…" chocked Riser. "But a plague is…"

"Riser!" shouted another rebel. "I've spotted movement. Orders?"

"Just stand ready! Crimson! What are you doing? Take out the gunner now!"

Crimson fired. The heavy shooting paused.

"Did you get him?" asked Wally.

By Nick Williams

"I hit his shoulder."

"At least that's stopped him from shooting," said a rebel.

"Wh-what's that on Jenkins!"

"Um I don't think so," gulped Crimson wolf.

The fire resumed. A man screamed.

"Wh-what's that on Jenkins!"

An abomination, maybe once human, ripped the rebel like he was holiday wrapping.

"Just fire! Just fire!"

Riser's bullets punched against it, but it only fell when everyone else fired on it.

"W-we have to get out of here!" squealed a rebel retreating.

"No!" screamed Riser.

"Should I go after him?" requested Wally.

"No!"

They heard the deserter's scream, followed by the sound of wet smacks and tearing.

"There's too few of us now!" gasped Riser.

Crimson fired another shot, silencing the heavy weapon. "Target down."

"You sure?" asked Wally.

"No."

"Doesn't matter. We're abandoning the mission, move!" exclaimed Riser.

"You sure. We just came so close," said Wally.

"Is that sarcasm?"

One of the things stormed out and swung at Wally with an energy blade. The rebel ducked, the monster severed the tree. Wally stabbed with his knife, but it bounced off its armour. The thing battered Wally back with one kick.

"Wally!" screamed Crimson wolf.

"Should've figured," sighed Riser.

The thing roared and other things in the distant howled.

"I think that thing just made a transmission call and his friends picked up," said a soldier.
"And they're coming over," sneered Riser. "Take him down! Take him down quick!"

They gave the monstrosity everything they had. Defiant, the creature lumbered towards Riser, hauling back its blade. Riser pounced forward. Jammed his weapon into its jaw and the ammunition splattered its head. The monstrosity crumpled down.

"Doesn't matter. We're abandoning the mission, move!"

Riser panted, staring at the body. "Wally you still up?"

"The thing broke my leg!"

"Crimson, carry him!" Riser threw away his weapon. "Everyone on your marks!"

"But the captain. We should take him anyways?" asked a rebel.

By Paul Scott

"Yeah, we could claim he's still alive and hold him for ransom."

"He's infected. That means we'll bring a virus back into our base."

"Oh."

Howling shrieks approached.

"And more importantly I don't think we have time to pack him... Run!"▪

BREACH

By Michael Grey

Containment Protocol - Incident Ref#: 0000037..Time Stamp - minus 00:56

"The irony that this is the first time I need the hospital has not escaped me," said Cole. He pushed a wet cloth to the tender welt on his forehead, compressing the swelling.

Not long after his return from the docks, the hospital was shut down. That was what they were told as all the staff were gathered in the loading bay, with the express instructions not to use the term 'abandoned' when they spoke about it. The regular influx of injuries and accidents had piled up in the theatres and waiting rooms until they spilled out across the entrance roads. A critical mass of pain and frustration sent those who could rioting through the wards. What security staff there were were quickly overwhelmed, and with at least 13 dead among the staff and nothing to treat patients with anyway, evacuation was called.

Just a temporary measure. Those words hung in his ears as he and Jean walked away. The next morning he saw smoke curling through the hospital's upper windows, with no hint of a fire service to put them out.

It had surprised him general panic had not broken out. Word of the G-Net outage broke on the same day. Some low level tech from the entertainment networks sufficiently spooked or unable to keep their mouth shut. It did not take long for those in the shelf stacking or delivery professions to put two and two together. Cue panic buying, followed swiftly by looting until the Marines stepped in and requisitioned all the supplies to distribute themselves.

And that was when Cole had found himself in a crush for the only supply truck to enter his neighbourhood that day. When the back was opened and everyone could see how empty it was there was a push for the front. Fists were thrown, someone landed a punch on a Marine and they responded in kind with batons and stun guns, leaving once calm was restored and without supplying a single gram of food.

"Probably for the best," said jean. "You could have waited days for treatment and lost pay to boot." She leaned back on her elbows and looked up. It was either unhappy coincidence or cruel cosmic joke that saw the summer turning into a record

By Chris Schlumpberger

By Nick Williams

breaker. Midday temperatures broke 45 every day that week, and the humidity never once dropped below 85. At night Cole slept sheetless and naked, stickily uncomfortable, and wishing every time he rose into a warm soup of consciousness that he could open his bedroom windows. The streets and his apartment still held the day's heat , so with nothing better to do they had retreated to his apartment roof for the sake of a few degrees. At night the Bubble's underside could to seen from the city's ambient glow, but up here, above the street lights, you could see through it to the stars.

Cole leant back too, resting his head on the warm concrete and took in the constellations. It still took his breath away. It must be ingrained into the human mind, he thought, hard wired that no matter what happened during your lifetime, a human could rely on the sky being exactly the same on the night they died as the one under which they were born.

And then to be on a different planet, with different stars. Some found it unnerving, but not Cole. It thrilled him, made him feel significant in a way he lacked the ability to describe.

"Beautiful, aren't they?" said Jean.

"I was just thinking the same thing."

"Makes you wonder just why people are worrying so much. I mean, the connection with the Sphere's down, but so what? There's nothing we need that can't be manufactured here." She sighed and worked her shoulder blades into the ground getting comfortable. "I'm beginning to think being on our own would be the best thing that could happen to a planet. What could go wrong when there's such a sight above us?"

He couldn't agree more. Without the corporations to squeeze every gram of profit from them the people of Gaian could focus on themselves.

Something Jean said prompted a memory. "You see that?" He drew a circle in the air, indicating an area of sky that would take in entire light years, but to them it showed as a patch of night fractionally paler than the rest.

"Yeah."

"That was originally a white dwarf. It went supernova about seven thousand years ago with an explosion powerful enough to be seen on Earth during the day." He saw Jean giving him a sidelong look. "It's true. It was recording by three separate civilisations on ancient Earth. It vaporised every planet in its system, creating a dust cloud which would be called the Crab Nebula. I've seen pictures of how it used to look from Earth. It was stunning. But that was a long time ago and a long way away, and now," he waved a hand, "just dust."

"And?" Jean asked.

"Each of those civilisations claimed it marked something important, something major that would affect them, bring death and destruction, the end of humanity, the usual. At the time they had no concept of the vastness of space, but they were certain it was not good news."

"Okay," she said slowly. "And why are you bringing this up now?"

"Because of what you said, that how could anything truly bad happen when there's such beauty in the galaxy." He pointed to the patch of night. "Three separate civilisations were adamant *that* heralded the end of humanity. And here we are living on its doorstep."

He went quiet. After a moment he became aware Jean and was looking at him. "Has anyone ever told you you're a regular ball of fun?"

"What's he talking about this time?" Cas pulled herself up the access ladder with on hand, the other held a cloth bag.

"Something about exploding stars and the end of the world," said Jean. She made

By "Hellebore"

By Matt Gilbert

room for Cas between them.

"The nebula? He's told me that one too. Exploding star, end of humanity, yada yada. And he calls me the paranoid one." She reached into the bag and pulled out three bottles, giving one each to Jean and Cole. They were different shapes and showed the gum lines where labels had been scraped from the sides.

Cole held his up to the light. "Is this…?"

"Cheers." Cas popped the top from hers and took a swig. "Sorry it's not cold, but there's only so much a girl can do."

"Beer? Where'd you get it?" Jean took a sip of her own.

Cas held a finger to her lips. "Perk of the job."

Cole laughed and toasted Cas. Jean joined in and they all leant back an enjoyed the view.

***

The stock shows the onplanet syndicates held on file had long since been exhausted, and with nothing on the channels people had taken to the streets looking for entertainment, or just some relief from the unrelenting heat. Cole and Jean joined them, walking with no aim in mind.

Their route took them by a packed Landing Square. The central point around which Gaian Prime was planned, Landing Square was an open plaza, dotted with strips of lawn and edged on three sides with open cafes and bars, and on the fourth with a manicured rise up to the Governor's mansion. In a city where every square metre was accounted for, it was the focal point for any public gathering or festival. Cole had never seen it so filled. He could almost imagine it was a public holiday were it not for the dry fountains and the heavy weapon emplacements gathered at the foot of the hill. He thought he saw Cas at one, but it was too hard to guess under the androgynous helmets.

"It's odd," said Jean.

"What?"

"Do you feel it? The calm? It's almost, I don't know, happy. Maybe not happy, maybe content."

He did feel it. The past week had seen public disturbances, but no riots, and once you got within the city blocks there was a feeling of community absent before. Without the exhaustive work and constant TV to occupy what few spare hours they had, Gaian Prime's citizens were forced into mingling, and it turned out they liked it.

A movement caught his attention. People walked quickly into one of the open sided bars, followed by more. A crowd was gathering around the TV in one corner. He pointed. "Maybe the G-Net's back up."

"Maybe," she said slowly. They walked towards it.

The crowd around the TV was five deep, all turned towards the screen.

What they watched was not from the G-Net. An on-the-spot news report, identifiable from the syndicate ticker trailing the bottom of the screen. Cole knew it was local because of the heavy green vegetation in the background and the identifiably reinforced prefab buildings to the fore. He even somewhat recognised the perky young reporter.

That was where the familiarity ended. The reporter sported a heavily padded flak jacket and a Marine helmet minus the visor. What should have been presenter-quality makeup was smudged by soot scratches and the mascara on one eye leaked over her cheek. She ducked repeatedly as she spoke, holding an index and middle finger to her right ear while the camera shook violently. Around her, the scenery flashed in orange blooms or in faltering white flashes played out in silence.

By Paul Scott

By Chris Schlumpberger

"Volume!" someone in the crowd shouted. A remote was found and the bar filled a bass fuzz of TV speakers struggling to relay the chaos of noises. On screen the reporter kept talking, unheard as something flashed and trailed a light to one side, she turned to follow it, apparently unaware its scream drowned her out completely.

Cole turned to a man beside him. "What's going on?"

"Dunno. One of the outer townships, one of the new ones to the east." He shrugged without taking his eyes from the screen.

The reporter pointed to something and the camera panned, following her finger. It showed what looked like a battle ground. What was just recognisable as a township street. Pre-assembled concrete walls with municipal buildings emerged from thick smoke, hiding the road fifty metres down. Marines took up covering positions at wall corners or behind upturned cars. They fired blindly into the fog while squads ran forward, keeping low, to slide behind other cover. The chatter of machine gun fire and the distant rumble of explosions, their base report a giveaway to their power, provided a perfect soundtrack to the visuals.

"Food riots," said someone else. She turned to Cole. "Has to be food riots. If it's bad here imagine what the provincials are going through."

The screen blossomed bright orange with a large blast, momentarily lighting every upturned face in the bar.

"They have explosives out there?" he said

"Who knows what the hillbillies keep. They're paranoid about the forest up there. And they're so remote. It must be like cabin fever for a whole town."

Cole looked back to the screen. While it was noon in Prime the soldiers sprinting across the street cast long shadows under a reddening sky. It must be very far to the east, deep in the continent's interior.

The camera panned back to the reporter as the background noise lowered to a distant rumble, allowing through a snatch of words. *"-to keep back – deemed a safe distance. No word has been heard of the population for three days. It is believed they're all in the hills behind the town – commander has assured us peace will be – to justice in Gaian Prime-"*

The small arms fire struck up again, enveloping the other words. At spots around the street fire teams poured rounds into the smoke as two assault teams ran in under the cover to disappear into the fog.

As soon as the last soldier slipped from view the shooters stopped, careful not to hit their own men.

After the gunfire it seemed quiet on screen. Even the reporter stopped talking and turned to look. The quiet allowed everyone in the bar to hear the scream. It came undoubtedly from the far end of the street and rose from nothing to lung tearing volume in a second.

Cole thought perhaps a Marine had been hit by the covering fire, but there was something in the tone which said no, no there was something else other than pain in that cry.

A shape coalesced then firmed in the smoke. It sailed through the air to land with a wet crunch in the empty street. The camera shifted, searched for focus and came to rest on the body of a Marine.

What happened next came too quickly to follow cohesively. The smoke lit from within with a sudden storm of automatic fire. Shouts accompanied between the shots, cried for confirmation, orders. And them more screams.

Two other shapes could be seen moving about in the smoke, just beyond what would be easily discerned. Whatever the first was, it was huge. It lumbered in a way suggesting size, weight, and was unmistakably in dimensions if not size, humanoid.

The other shape emerged flying like the Marine before, only much larger. A car, bent and almost unrecognisable but for the tyres and broken windows. It came from the smoke like a ridiculously oversized and misshapen football, hit the street dead middle, throwing up sparks and stone chips where the bodywork struck concrete, and bounced directly at the camera.

The reporter, turned, ducked, began the root of a scream as the camera shifted as if

By Paul Scott

dropped.

And the screen went blank. Static hissed. Almost immediately dreadball filled the TV, players darting, looking for an opening, and two commentators spewing out statistics like savants.

***

“What the hell was that?”

“I don’t know. I don’t. Maybe like they said, food riots.”

“Rioters don’t throw cars, Cole.”

By Mark Relf

“You think I don’t know that!” He shouted, not meaning to. After the bar they’d both felt the unspoken need to find somewhere they felt safer, so they went to his apartment. From the way everyone meandered as they had that morning he guessed the news report was not general knowledge. More than a few heads turned at his voice. “I don’t know,” he said more quietly.

He opened to door to the stairwell and they walked up in silence. He didn’t want to talk. Talking would mean thinking, and he did not want to consider what the news report images could mean. Suddenly the feeling of disconnection did not feel so warm. The future was still full of potential, although not in the way it had that morning.

He was only partly surprised to find Cas inside his apartment, sat in one of the easy chairs, beside two full kitbags. She got up when they entered.

“I wondered if you were going to arrive. I was just about to leave.”

Cole filled in the blanks but Jean said, “Leave where?”

“The east. There’s been reports of food riots in the interior townships and we’re being called in for crowd control.”

It was the way she said it. Cole had known Cas for long enough to understand the flat delivery. “That’s not it though, is it?”

“You’re learning,” she said with the half slant of a smile. “No, I don’t believe it. Riot control is one thing, but a whole detachment is being mobilised, and we’re going armed for war. We don’t need gunships for crowd control. There’s something else too.” She let the sentence trail off.

“I’m not in the mood, Cas.”

"Easy, partner. I didn't want to say anything before, I know what you think about my theories, and I if I told you straight I don't think you would have believed me."

"I don't believe half the things you say."

She smiled. "I know, but with you going on about the nebula and Gaian being in the blast radius I assumed you think I was trying to play with you."

"I do not *go on* about the nebula."

"You do," said Jean.

Cole pressed his fingertips to his temple. "Just tell me, Cas."

She shrugged. "I heard they're not farming up there. They're digging." She let the inference hang a moment before, "Some kind of alien tech or artefact. But the thing is, it didn't come from this planet. They found it buried under the ground mulch, as if it fell from space. The fall trajectory was back-calculated to the nebula."

He looked at her and saw no guile on her face. "Where did you hear this?"

Another shrug. "I know people ,people who think like me, and we talk. Either way, there's too much of a coincidence for the site, these *riots* and us heading out to be coincidence." She stopped short. Jean didn't notice it, but Cole did.

"You think the G-Net has something to do with it." It was not a question.

By Matt Gilbert

"Like I said, too much of a coincidence. But right now there's nothing we can do about it." She hauled one of the bags onto the table, unzipped it and reached inside. "I don't know what's going on, Cole. Maybe I'll it will become a bit more clear when I get there, but until then," she pulled out the same heavy pistol she'd worn the week before. "I think you better have this."

Instinctively he stepped back and put his hands up. "What? No. I don't know how to use one of those. I think you're overreacting."

"I don't," said Jean, and took the pistol. She sighted down it and checked the action just like he'd seen in every bad action film but with some competence. "Ammo?"

By Paul Scott

Cas pulled out a holster and a box of bullets, and handed them over with a wink. "Look after him while I'm gone."

***

They were back on the roof. It had become ritualistic over the last week for he, Jean and Cas to retreat up there after sunset. It was almost inertia which took him and Jean back up after the sun went down.

They sat quietly. They felt simultaneously diminished and concerned. Cole could not help but remember replaying the news report in his head, over-remembering the soldier's body as it flew through the air. With each replaying the limbs would fly more slackly, emphasising the lack of life

By now word of the news report would have spread. It was perhaps just one channel and just one showing, but with 20 million people in Prime enough would have seen it that rumour would spread, filling the void left by 24 hour online entertainment like fire, gaining momentum and exaggeration with each iteration. Cole found himself wondering how people could believe and even pass on such inflammatory rumour when he caught himself playing the news report through his mind again, but instead of a faceless Marine thrown dead against some far off road, it was Cas.

"She'll be alright." Jean looked at him and smiled.

He shook his head. "Reading my mind?"

"It wasn't too hard."

"You too?"

She nodded but didn't say anything.

He looked out and realised they'd faced themselves east. From here Prime slipped steadily down to an immense flood plain of tangled grass and bog root. Far below them, just outside the Bubble, the lights of Pentridge Prison burned bright. Perhaps the

one place in Prime where the electricity was not rationed.

"I just," he began, and stopped.

"What?"

"I just… On one hand, maybe the rational part of me is thinking that perhaps this is all coincidence. I mean the G-Net is just machinery. Things break. And we're living through things breaking, and it's uncomfortable and things are changing. It's understandable people would go a little crazy. But another part of me is thinking; maybe I'm in denial? Maybe the signs are right in front of me and I'm refusing to accept them because I wouldn't want to deal with the consequences if I was right." He laughed weakly. "Maybe I've been around Cas too long."

Jean didn't say anything and he carried on, "You read much of ancient history? The second world war?"

"Was that the on in Africa?"

"No, Europa. One of the biggest countries invaded another one. They won everything, rolled back the troops right up to the coast and damn near pushed them into the sea. And these troops, as they pulled back, limping and bloodied, past entire towns of people still going about their day like it was any other. Farmers tilling fields, going around unexploded bombs, clerks selling shoes, ignoring the line of maimed soldiers trudging by. There could have been no other way to see it than their way of lives were about to be erased, or at best changed forever, but they did everything they could to pretend otherwise." He shook his head. "I honestly don't know if I'm the equivalent of that shopkeeper."

"Like you said, that was ancient history. We're different now, Cole. Advanced, educated. We may be at the far end of an empire, but we're part of that empire, the biggest one the galaxy's seen with the might and technology to back that up."

He gave her a sidelong look. "Are you trying to comfort me?"

"A little," she laughed. "Want to try a little test?"

"Sure."

By Chris Schlumpberger

By Nick Williams

She held out her hand. He raised an eyebrow but took it. "We're going to close our eyes," she said, "count to three and if everything's the same we'll take it as a sign we'll be fine. Okay?"

He smiled. "Okay."

He closed his eyes and Jean counted. "One. Two . Three. And, open."

For a moment he though he hadn't opened his eyes. And then he realised the Bubble had gone out.

***

Food and water rationing, close to martial law and a heat wave bordering on intolerable drove Prime's citizens to their limit. The indigenous spores flooding the city's streets pushed them over it.

It did not matter that it was the next logical step in energy conservation. The people saw the barracks, Governor's mansion and Pentridge prison still bathed with electric light, and they broke.

Without the nullifying toxins and charge running through the Bubble's canvass, the dense spores from Gaian's mega trees broke the membrane, pushed by urgent inshore winds. The streets filled with pollen and microorganisms. Within hours the eyes and noses of almost every person streamed and wore red with abrasive reactions.

Cole and Jean heard the first riots that morning. The pop and crack of crowd controlling stun guns soon gave way the arrhythmic chatter of automatic rifle fire, and the screams of trapped crowds. By late morning the same series of sounds could be heard from another part of the city. By the day's end the streets had been driven clean by soldiers and invasive spores.

***

Cole ducked as he ran, lowering himself to keep his profile below the upturned stall. He came to a breathless halt just before crashing into it, bringing himself up short and holding one hand out against the metal frame, as if that alone would have been enough to stop the collision.

He took a moment to catch his breath then risked a swift look around the edge. The Marines still lounged behind the sand bags

of their emplacement, not looking in any particular direction. Cole allowed himself to breath and then checked the package in his other arm. It was squashed a little, but still intact. The vacuum packing had held against the beating his headlong run had given it.

Another look around the stall showed the Marines as they had been before. The whole of Landing Square looked like the scene of a recent battle, albeit a heavily one sided one. Word was the worst of the riots had been here at the foot of the Governor's mansion, and the military had not hesitated. He could see no bodies, but scorch marks and bullet holes riddled the cream paving stones, and brown stains showed where no one had bothered to wash away the blood.

By "Pathfinder Pete MdF"

All-out marshal law had been declared after the Bubble had gone out, with all citizenry ordered to remain indoors at all times, and that supplies would be delivered directly. When none came after the first 24 hours, Cole and Jean began taking turns to scavenge what felt like a deserted city. Empty but for the Marine emplacements at major junctions and squares. From the muted sound of gunfire from deep within the city Cole had guessed he was not the only one risking the curfew.

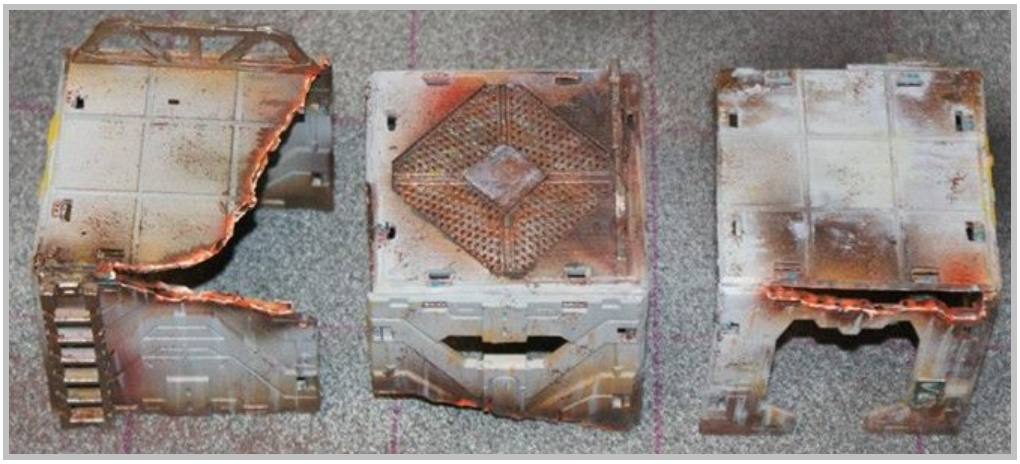
He froze. A pollen mote the size of his fist wafted over the stall on an unfelt breeze. It slowed, lowered before his face and hung there. He tried to will it to float on, but didn't dare to try and blow it away.

It hung motionless for second, then bobbed and began to float backwards, out into the square. He relaxed just as it lost height and fell to the flagstones, popping open silently and dispersing its seed in the thousands.

He breathed in before he could stop, and sneezed without control.

There was a shout from where the Marines were. Without thinking he was at a sprint, diagonally away from the upturned stall to the nearest side street from the square. Behind him someone shouted to halt and the stall erupted, shredded with high velocity repeater rounds. Cole felt the ground beneath his feet shake and he could imagine the tracer rounds following him, eating up the stones just behind his feet. With a final effort he shot into the alley, eyes

streaming, and raced for home.



By Paul Scott

***

He reached his apartment keeping to back alleys and precincts. At one point a military truck eclipsed the end of one alley. He hid until it and the accompanying soldiers moved on, squashing himself behind a dumpster and furiously pressing a hand over his nose and mouth.

The entrance to his building had been half-heartedly barricaded with old furniture and packing crates. He pushed through and up the stairs, never once seeing another soul. He walked quietly, not wanting to alert anyone in the apartments to his presence. He had risked his life for the food he carried and did not want to lose it to some mugging so close to home. At his apartment he knocked a five beat pattern to let Jean know it was him, and unlocked the door.

The first sign he had that something was wrong was the way Jean sat in the chair; hands on its arms and straight backed. The second was the gun barrel pressed against the back of his skull.

There was a moment of dumb questioning, then he realised that whoever held the gun would have been in the bathroom, and he cursed himself for being so stupid.

Jean began to stand up and his eyes went wide, but dare not shake his head. He'd just give them the damned food and hopefully they'd leave. What did she think she was doing?

"You still have some learning to do, partner," said a familiar voice from behind.

He blinked, too shocked and too filled with residual fear to turn. The barrel was removed and Cas stepped in front of him. He began to smile, then stopped when he took her in completely. She still wore her marine battle armour, but scorched and torn, and what looked like a sleeve from some khaki fatigues was wrapped tightly around the left side of her head, a deep crimson dot where the eye would have been. She saw him react, managed her old smile through a wall of exhaustion and said, "It's happening."

….END OF PART TWO…

For more stories like this, visit Michael's blog at www.michaelgrey.com.au

By Boris Samec

Inside:

The Iron Forge

Witness our new monthly collection of masterful paintings, along with short descriptions by the painters of how they were done...

More Journeys of the Weedy Elves

Follow the trials and tribulations of the Weedy Elves as they battle in a new tournament...

IT'S A JOB, PART 4

The new marines from offworld have no idea of the trouble they're about to get in to...

BREACH, PART 2

It's quiet. Too quiet. And the clouds on the horizon have an unearthly and deadly payload...

And much more!